

EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE IN PRESCHOOL

Research has focused on the correlation between teacher explicit and implicit bias and the use of exclusionary discipline in the K-12 environment. Explicit bias refers to the conscious beliefs, perceptions, and attitudes held about a person or group of people (Perception Institute, 2016). Explicit bias is when someone makes a conscious, intentional action. Implicit bias involves involuntary action. It is bias that is situated in unconscious thoughts that influence decisions and actions (Staats, Capatosto, Wright, & Contractor, 2015).

Implicit bias has found its way into the “halls and walls” of preschool classrooms through high suspension and expulsion rates among Black preschool students, especially Black preschool males (Gilliam, Maupin, Reyes, Accavitti, & Shic, 2016). Although Black preschoolers make up 19% of the overall preschool enrollment, they account for 47% of the suspension rates (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). Root causation of this phenomenon is unknown. Nevertheless, there is an association between suspension rates and implicit bias of educators.

The Yale Child Study (2016) examined implicit bias in preschool educators (Gilliam, et al., 2016). In this study, Gilliam, et al. (2106) primed preschool teachers with scenarios about Black girl’s, Black boy’s, White girl’s, and White boy’s behaviors. Teachers were then asked to imagine these children were in their classrooms. Using an eye-tracking device, the researchers identified teachers’ gazing more closely and for extended periods at Black boys in comparison to the other students (Gilliam, et al., 2016). Teacher gaze was linked to the expectation of the child demonstrating disruptive classroom behavior. From the extended watching of Black boys, it could be extrapolated that these children were not necessarily misbehaving more than their peers; but, that these children were being caught in the act of misbehaving more often. The teachers’ belief that Black males would harm other children, were less innocent, more mature, and most likely to be perpetrators of misbehavior, contributed to the action of using exclusionary discipline (Gilliam, et al., 2016).

Implicit bias was also noted in how teachers viewed the child’s family history. Empathy was more readily displayed among teachers of the same ethnic and cultural background once family information and unique dynamics were shared. Consequently, when such family information was shared with teachers of differing ethnic or cultural backgrounds, perceptions of misbehavior increased (Gilliam, et al., 2016). These perceptions of misbehavior resulted in more frequent dismissal from the classroom of Black male students. This condition of dismissal is also referred to as being “pushed out” of the educational setting.

Exclusionary discipline practices place the child in jeopardy of not receiving equitable and equal educational opportunities as a result of increased time spent outside of the educational setting away from their class and classmates (Keane & Calkins, 2004; Henneman, 2014). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education (NAECS/SDE) (2002) stated, “The first years of life are critical for later outcomes. Young children have an innate desire to learn. That desire can be supported or undermined by early experiences” (National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), 2002, p. 2).

The use of exclusionary discipline increases the potential for Black boys to have their early educational experiences undermined. The cycle of being “pushed out” of the educational setting at early ages supports the notion of long-term educational and societal challenges. Consequently, being “pushed out” can set Black boys, especially those who live in high poverty environments, towards a trajectory of poor educational and negative adult outcomes based on how they were perceived by teachers during their earliest classroom experiences.

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The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education issued a policy statement regarding expulsion and suspension in early childhood settings (December, 2014). This policy statement suggests there is an overrepresentation of minority preschoolers who are removed from school as a result of suspension and expulsion that has resulted in a Civil Rights issue whereby children do not receive “equal “educational experiences as compared to their peers. Civil Rights are the rights individuals have to receive equal treatment and to be free from discriminatory actions. Being removed from school more often influences whether these children receive free and appropriate public education (FAPE) services as deemed by federal education code (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Black families with common experiences of being “pushed out” of preschool classrooms are faced with ongoing stressors of moving from one child care program to the next. These early messages have lasting effects of tracking for misbehavior that ultimately marginalizes these young students out of early learning environments (Henneman, 2014). The early criminalization of Black preschool boys from the outset of their educational journey is not what most parents have in mind during the birth of their child, yet the reality of their Black sons being subjected to life-long treatment as criminals is exactly what occurs starting in many preschool classrooms (Henneman, 2014).

The trajectory of being excluded from the classroom at early ages to poor educational and negative adult outcomes is better known as the “preschool to prison pipeline.” The notion of the “pipeline” is related to the high numbers of incarcerated Black men who did not complete high school (Kearney, Harris, Jácome, & Parker, 2014). There is a direct association between high school completion and receiving exclusionary disciplinary practices. The number of suspensions received in the 9th grade is significantly related to a student’s likelihood of completing high school (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015). The greater the number of suspension, the greater the chance that the student will drop out. Students with multiple suspensions in 9th grade are more likely to have received multiple suspensions in their earlier educational experiences (Balfanz, et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Human Health and U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Raffaele Mendez, 2003). The questions become, how many students received suspensions and expulsions because of negative behavior and how many received these exclusionary disciplinary practices because of teacher implicit bias?

Black children have historically, and continue, to receive exclusionary discipline at disproportionate rates. During the 2013-14 school year, Black boys represented less than 20% of preschool enrollment, and nearly half (45%) of all male preschool out-of-school suspensions (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2016). If the use of exclusionary discipline practices on Black children is based on implicit bias, it is in violation of Title VI of the *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 which mandates that institutions receiving federal assistance from the U.S. Department of Education cannot use discipline in a discriminatory manner (Civil Rights Act, 1964).

The defacto profiling of Black boys to receive exclusionary discipline violates the civil rights of these vulnerable children as they do not have access to the classroom environment. Black boys are seemingly targeted not because of frequent inappropriate behavior, but because teachers anticipate inappropriate behavior from this preschool cohort. If the correlation between implicit bias in early education and exclusionary disciplinary practices holds true, and if exclusionary discipline practices continues to be associated with incarceration, then the

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implications to the systemic sentencing of Black boys, especially those from low income communities, to a life of strife is far-reaching.

National early care and education experts agree the early years (birth until the first day of kindergarten) is a period when children's foundation for learning, social and emotional well-being, and health are most critical (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000). This rapid developmental period requires skilled and prepared adults that are able to provide the necessary supports to address typical developmental child behaviors of all their students regardless of race and background (Shonkoff & Philips, 2000; U.S. Department of Human Health and U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The implication of suspending Black boys from school is that these vulnerable children miss out on key foundational learning.

There are those educators who point to significant challenges within the classroom environment. Research from the Center for Disease Control - Kaiser Foundation Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study shows there is an association between exposure to trauma and various life-long challenges including mental, physical, and psychological health (Center for Disease Control & Kaiser Permanente, 1998). Framing the discussion solely on trauma removes the onus of preschool educational settings from developing exclusionary discipline policies that are equitable. The view that all behavioral problems are as a result of ACEs maintains the perspective that the responsibility lies solely with the child and family. Additionally, this view also fails to encourage preschool settings to think critically about developing disciplinary policies and practices that provide opportunities for all students to engage in the classroom environment.

Preschool educators have a responsibility to examine how biases influence the use exclusionary discipline, especially with their Black male students. Early childhood leaders have an obligation to help coach and develop educators who are versed in how their own bias, both explicit and implicit, impacts their interaction with their students. Disciplinary actions should be developmentally appropriate for the behavior and not mirror punitive, exclusionary, criminalized practices employed in the criminal justice system (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2014). For instance, a type of disciplinary practice that schools use that mirrors the criminal justice system is the practice of using a color-coded card system. Although the card colors may vary; the general practice within this system requires preschoolers to turn colored cards to either green (acceptable behavior), yellow (somewhat acceptable) or red (unacceptable) based on teacher perception of the child's behavior. In this disciplinary practice, if a preschooler turns three red cards as requested by their teacher, the consequence could warrant a visit to the director's office and remain under his/her supervision for the duration of the day until pickup. This displaces the preschooler outside the learning environment and diminishes opportunities to socialize with peers.

Teachers that employ punitive disciplinary techniques may find it challenging to foster supportive and positive classroom environments, as well as develop meaningful relationships with children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and U.S. Department of Education, 2014). Consequently, alternative practices may include helping preschoolers build self-regulation skills through a new and emerging technique known as mindfulness. Mindfulness focuses you to pay attention to the present moment, oneself, and taking deep breaths; dramatically slowing down time. Self-regulation skills contribute to social-emotional well-being and is a predictor of positive outcomes for a lifespan (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Davidson, 2015). Social-emotional well-being is the gateway to cognitive functioning, increased academic

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performance, and allows preschoolers to remain global members of their learning community (Flook et al., 2015).

Another alternative disciplinary technique is restorative practices. Restorative practices have their institutional roots with children and youth in the juvenile justice system. Originally known as restorative justice, restorative practices are gaining momentum as a successful disciplinary practice in schools. The focus of restorative practices is on keeping the child engaged with the learning community instead of relying on exclusion (González, 2012). Like mindfulness, the foundation of restorative justice is self-regulation of behavior. When restorative practices are integrated within the preschool environment, the students are taught to understand their behavior and methods of dealing with challenging situations (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2011). Although restorative practices have been successful in decreasing suspensions and expulsions for Black children (International Institute for Restorative Practices, 2014), these techniques are used when the child has been found to have behaved inappropriately.

Mindfulness and restorative justice are practices that keep the child engaged in school; however, these techniques assume the child has misbehaved. Neither mindfulness nor restorative justice thoroughly account for teacher bias. As indicated by the Yale Child Study (2016), teacher bias influences the inequitable targeting of Black children, especially Black boys, for discipline. A method to begin to address teacher bias is culturally relevant and responsive classroom engagement techniques. Ladson-Billings (1998) challenges educators to think critically about the role of racism and the importance of employing culturally relevant and responsive classroom techniques to support student engagement.

Culturally relevant and responsive classrooms are inclusive of all children from a holistic perspective. The teacher considers children's personal and family backgrounds, learning styles, and the educational systems, policies and practices that may advantage or disadvantage them. More importantly, a teacher's awareness of their own biases and lens of influence impacts approaches to creating a positive and equitable learning environment where all students benefit. For example, you may ask yourself as an educator do I:

- Recognize my cultural lens and biases – supports “misinterpretation of behaviors and inequitable treatment of culturally different students”
- Have knowledge of students' cultural background – helps to gain general knowledge of a given culture—you can do so by creating family study groups and providing a platform to learn firsthand about students' historical and cultural backgrounds
- Understand and are aware of the broader, social, economic, and political context – examine how larger societal discriminatory practices are perpetuated in school settings and influences discipline policies against certain children
- Have the ability and willingness to use culturally appropriate management strategies – display books about diversity and community, create a kindness box where students exchange and read notes to one another, be sensitive to cultural differences in communication styles within families
- Build Caring Classrooms Communities – develop positive teacher-relationships to foster connectedness – children tend to make decisions based on whether teachers care or not

(Metropolitan Center for Urban Education 2008, p. 3-6)

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Early education professionals cannot ignore the de facto discrimination that occurs because of implicit bias. The examination of how implicit bias effects exclusionary disciplinary tactics provides an opportunity to change outcomes for generations of Black boys.

Although the focus of this article is on exclusionary discipline policies and Black boys, the authors would be remiss to not mention the need for examination of the impact of exclusionary discipline policies on Black girls. Like their male counterparts, Black girls disproportionately receive exclusionary discipline. When educators review exclusionary discipline policies and practices as they are applied to young Black Boys, they should also review these policies and practices through a gender specific lens that accounts for the unique experiences of Black girls.

The levers of sustainable change initiatives rests in addressing belief systems. The mental models that are held by educators drives how they work with their students. It is necessary for early care educators to examine their practices as well as engage in the work of confronting their bias. The question is, will early education teachers and leaders meet the opportunity, or reject it?

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